

New theory, new questions: Introduction to special section

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Imagine a society that has never developed the biological sciences but which, located in a tropical paradise, is surrounded with thousands of species of birds. Bird watching has become a popular pastime in this culture, and serious hobbyists enjoy watching birds, discussing them, even writing about them. One day some people arrive from another society. They explain that they too want to watch the birds, discuss them, and even write about them, but they will be doing it differently. The newcomers seem as interested in recording data as appreciating the birds' beauty. They spend days studying the same bird and discussing questions such as how birds are able to fly, to migrate, to build the same kind of nest year after year. At first the natives try to laugh off the outsiders. But after a while, when the foreigners start dissecting and labeling birds and claiming that they know more about birds than the people who grew up watching them, it's gone too far. No longer does it seem adequate to dismiss it as a fad. The visitors are now discussing birds using a whole new vocabulary. Enough is enough!

The tale parallels the arrival of new film theory and new ways of looking at film, falling under the vague label of "semiology" and "structuralism," that have gained attention and interest in the U.S. film scene in the 70s. The moral is obvious, I hope. There is a distinct difference between appreciating something and analyzing it. That point should seem self-evident, but apparently not very many people have understood it since so much hostility has accompanied the introduction of new film theory in North America.

The criticism we are used to, that which dominates the bulk of film discussion, aims at helping us appreciate (some would say consume) film. It poses the question of *understanding* film in terms of finding the *meaning* of a film. In contrast, the newer semiological criticism states the question of understanding in terms of *how* it is that a film means.

On the one side, we have a criticism that leads up to and of paraphrase and usually an aesthetic (and/or consumer) judgment. On the other side, we have a criticism that strives to explain mechanisms. What it means vs. how it means. Obviously this is a simplistic division to make a point. Equally obviously, the division is not as insurmountable as has been supposed. This is particularly the case if we combine both concerns and both approaches with a rigorous historical analysis that could give a foundation for the often detached fancies of both methods as usually practiced.

Semiology, the scientific study of communications, grew rapidly in the 60s in Europe, particularly in France and Italy, accompanied by the profusion of various “structuralisms,” a post-Stalin revival of Marxist thought, the revolution in modern linguistics, and fundamental rethinking in the human sciences. Film semiotics grew at the same time. Imported to the English-speaking world in the 70s, the concerns of film semiology found a home in England with *Screen* and in the U.S. and Canada with a number of younger people dissatisfied with accepted film criticism orthodoxies.

As might be expected, the development of film semiology in North America has been uneven. The hostility of established criticism has been strong. Although it has several sources, a good part of this hostility stems from the correct perception that semiology is often accompanied by politically radical thought. Other factors influenced the development of film semiology as well. Because much of the important work is not translated, fluency in French has been almost essential, and this restricts the field. For several years a Paris film program has immersed a small but very talented number of U.S. students in high level theoretical study with the leading French film thinkers. At home, however, not one university film program has shown itself committed to film semiology in a serious way. And although *Film Quarterly* published a number of important articles on semiology, no one film publication here acts as a forum for the field. In fact, most publications are decidedly hostile. In addition, semiology has appealed largely to younger people, who, by definition, have little power or prestige.

Some internal problems complicate the picture further. Semiologists are still establishing their field. As with any new areas of study, film semiology has been filled with false leads, awkwardly established and used terms and definitions, quarrels over first principles, and doses of plain old bad writing. The results have often appeared garbled or confusing and thereby open to charges of elitism, idealism, and irrelevant abstraction. Some outlines emerge clearly, but the details are often disputed or not worked out. As a result of the interaction of these diverse factors, film semiology has grown unevenly and its development has been complicated by its affinity for politically left thought as well as other intellectual directions, such as psychoanalysis and formalism. It

may be best to recognize that the concerns of “film semiologists” often go beyond film and semiology into other areas and to discard the term “semiology” as too narrow to describe the actual situation.

In reality, unevenness is the most characteristic element of the new film theory situation at present. On the one hand, we have some people who have finished dissertations using new film theory; for example, Judith Mayne, “The Ideologies of Metacinema” (SUNY-Buffalo, 1975) and Julia Lesage, “The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory” (Indiana, 1975). On the other hand, faculty unable or unwilling to learn about it discourage students from working in this area. And established critics, teachers, and scholars have taken to attacking the new tendency with rancor and ridicule. Thus today there is a distinct division in film thought between an entrenched orthodoxy and a newer tendency familiar with, though not defined exclusively by, semiology. As antagonistic as this division has been, I think it unlikely that it will come to as definite a “revolution” in thought as linguistics experienced in the 60s with the overthrow of traditionalists by transformational and generative linguists. Whatever the outcome, it seems clear that new theory is here to stay. It’s not the fad some so urgently wished it were.

Given that new theory is here to stay, some problems appear to limit the continued development of the field at present. First, because of the reasons outlined earlier, we have a situation in which a small number of people are doing some interesting and potentially important work, but understanding that material depends on learning a new vocabulary and a new way of thinking about film. Naturally, many people have been skeptical about preparing themselves to understand it until they can see some results. We need two remedies. First, semiologists, if indeed they are involved in the scientific study of film, must learn the principles of good scientific writing. The difference between the laboratory and the lecture hall, between research notes and expository prose, hasn't been grasped by many of the pioneers in this area.

In addition, we need a basic introduction, a film textbook based on semiology—the kind useful for a first undergraduate course in film. Such a text would not only have a pedagogical use, but it would also function as a polemical device: If it were written on such a simple level, it could then introduce film semiotics to established film teachers as well as to students. (It’s also obvious that the writer of that first text would have her/his career made.)

The fact that people are entering into the discussion of new film theory at distinctly different levels creates a problem. While some U.S. undergraduates produce original and speculative work in Paris, some senior professors in film studies are just now learning the basic vocabulary of the field. This problem of a distinct continuum of

beginners and advanced theorists, all of whom have gotten into the field with different preparation in the past few years must be dealt with. It is elitist to sidestep the matter by saying things seem “too fluid” to settle, or that the new people and the outsiders will just have to catch up as well as they can. At the same time, no quarter should be given to people who claim expertise in film criticism and theory but who refuse to examine the emergence of new thought seriously. Whatever their positions, titles, degrees, or publications, by their laziness they have given up any claim to the name of intellectual.

Another major limit on new film theory at present is its often unclear relation to Marxism. Semiology has emerged in Italy and France within an intellectual ambiance in which a fairly thorough knowledge of Marxist thought is taken for granted. Presumably in that context the political implications are clearer. The introduction of new theory in the English speaking world has compounded the political problem, however. In England a group of intellectuals around *Screen* who define themselves against the establishment at the same time they are inside it by virtue of their educational privilege have taken up new theory. As a result in many cases, a distinctly intellectual, even ethereal Marxism has emerged.

Here, in the U.S., the relation of semiology and Marxism seems to be expressed in two ways. Some people have gone from an interest in film semiology to an examination of the Marxist-influenced theory and assumptions surrounding it. Others have moved from an established left position to examine semiology as a way of perhaps getting beyond the simplistic and mechanistic approaches to film that characterize much prevalent left film criticism.

Of course there is nothing inherently radical, left, socialist, or Marxist about semiology. Nor is there anything inherently reactionary and formalistic about it. Thus every specific example has to be viewed with a critical eye—critical in terms of film and critical in terms of politics. As Constance Penley pointed out in her article on French theorist Christian Metz (“Semiology’s Radical Possibilities”) in JUMP CUT 5, claims for scientific neutrality can mask a retrograde theoretical foundation. Though students report that Metz, the leading figure in French film semiology, is clearly left-leaning in his classes and conversation, his published work avoids political implications and conclusions, as does that of other leading French figures. The situation of Italian semiology is similar. Umberto Eco, the main theorist, is a member of the Il Manifesto split to the left of the Italian Communist Party. Yet in his recent *A Theory of Semiotics* (Indiana, 1975) the relation of this theory to Marxism and his political allegiance remains unexplained. Clearly, it would be a lot easier to assess the genuine political significance of semiology in Marxist terms if its proponents were not so coy or reticent.

Despite the political and intellectual unevenness of new film theory's growth, it seems we are beginning a new stage of its development in the English-speaking world. The initial questions have been examined. Clearly inadequate early formulations—such as the idea of a “classic realist or Hollywood film” or the application of semiology to the avant-garde—are being critiqued, explored in terms of practical work, and fleshed out in a more reasonable way. Basic faults with the theorizing so far, such as ignoring the relation of films to spectators, are being taken up, even if awkwardly, as in the recent enthusiasm in England for psychoanalysis. And the natural concomitant of any new burst of film theory, the valorization of a new set of films, has gotten beyond the stage of blind adulation to the critical assessment of Godard, Godard-Gorin, Vertov, Straub-Huillet, and others.

This new stage has been accompanied by a clearer political formulation of the matters at hand, a clearer relation to Marxist thought and practice as people have had the time to work these questions through. Even speaking cautiously, I think it fair to say we are beyond the initial exploratory phase of developing a new film theory adequate to the cinematic and political realities of the 70s.

The articles which follow represent this new maturity in the ongoing development of radical film criticism. While each essay was written independently of the others, taken together they are a useful indication of the kind of work being done, its range, its variety, and its promise, which is why we decided to cluster them together. To begin, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith examines the work of Christian Metz, its origins and basic assumptions. Saying that much more needs to be done, Nowell-Smith points out that linguistics-influenced film semiology alone can slip into formalism. He argues the need to examine the relation of artistic production to economic production in order to establish a materialist base for semiology.

Although French semiologist Roland Barthes has concentrated on literature, his ideas have been influential in film theory as well. Judith Mayne and Julia Lesage examine how Barthes' book *S/Z* can be used in film analysis. Mayne describes the book's overall position as a questioning of the nature of realism—a basic concern of cinema theory as well. Barthes' ability to point out many complex levels of meaning and their interrelationship, Mayne finds, helps indicate how class ideology operates in a work of art. In turn, Lesage applies the insights of Barthes to Jean Renoir's *RULES OF THE GAME*, providing a detailed analysis of the film—an example which shows the application of semiological theory to a specific, widely known film. The result shows how this kind of study is different from conventional criticism and points out new directions for film students and teachers.

From an understanding of how conventional realism operates in film, it

is natural for radical critics to then question the use of traditional realism in mainstream cinema and left filmmaking. Two British feminist film critics, Claire Johnston and Pam Cook, have examined this area in depth, and in an analysis of their work, E. Ann Kaplan considers the background to and complex assumptions of their criticism.

Johnston has argued for a “counter cinema”—a kind of film that is not consumed, as conventional realist films are, but which stimulates an active audience response. Her review of the controversial English film, NIGHTCLEANERS, about the unionizing efforts of women who clean offices at night, makes the case for the film clearly and forcefully. At the same time, as Kaplan points out, the theoretical correctness of such a film does not always mean it is practically useful in the classroom or in feminist organizing. The theory itself must be questioned on the basis of its results. Such a questioning is begun by Martin Walsh in his careful analysis of Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet’s recent film MOSES AND AARON, based on Schoenberg’s opera. Again, questions of realism, the interruption of conventional response, and ideology are central to the study, and the examination of these questions about the film is continued in dialogue with the filmmakers in Joel Rogers’ interview.

Taken together or apart, these articles are not as important for the answers they provide as much as for the questions they raise. Their chief virtue is precisely that they raise even more questions in attempting to explore some initial ones. But they raise these questions openly, not ignoring them, as does conventional film criticism with its taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices. And the differences between different theorists and critics—the different answers they find for these new questions—must be kept clear. Continued internal discussion and debate will take place. But taken as a whole, the international development of a new radical criticism is clearly established. The question is no longer, “Is it a fad?” but rather, “What are you waiting for?”